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**BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD**  
**OR**  
**ENGLISH AS SHE WILL BE SPOKE AND WROTE**

## TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW

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# BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

OR

ENGLISH AS SHE WILL BE SPOKE  
AND WROTE

BY

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“It was right that an essay on the future of English should contain little about English itself. To test the mirror, watch what it reflects. The less we think about our language, the likelier we are to retain the qualities which have made it what it is; the more we study it, the greater the risk of breaking that continuous impulse with which the English mind, in high and low alike, feels its way through the world, watching without defining, absorbing rather than classifying, identified with the meanings of things, not distinguished from them. For its loyal use and a true maintenance of the virtue of its tradition we have



## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

only to assume that it was made for our purposes by others whose purposes were the same as ours, and to see that it lives to-day on our lips as it lived once on theirs. 'Ripeness is all.'"—Basil de Sélincourt : *Pomona : or the Future of English*.

Mr de Sélincourt is a typical Englishman : he might, and for ought I know may, write many of those third-place leaders in *The Times* which delight the common-rooms of Oxford colleges.

I am not a typical Englishman, but a Scotsman born abroad, and in all the ninety-odd pages of Mr de Sélincourt's essay on the future of the English language I can find scarcely a paragraph to agree with. Inevitable, that. To nine Scotsmen, ten Americans, and eleven Irishmen, out of ten, his essay breathes just that spirit of Englishry—rather insular, but oh how gentlemanly!—

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

which has always infuriated them. That he meant it to, seems improbable ; the Englishman seldom knows that he is irritating men of other nations, and never for the life of him can tell why he should. There is evidence that Mr de Sélincourt tried to be liberal, just, merciful even, to those unfortunates by birth and education who pronounce both *r*'s in *farther* or say *Ain't I?* for *Aren't I?* in ordinary rapid speech. But his traditions are too strong for him. With the best will in the world he cannot honestly abide foreigners who speak the language "ful faire and fetisly" after the school of Dublin or New York ; still less, foreigners who study to alter it in ways not authorized at Oxford. "The less we think about our language, the likelier we are to retain the qualities which have made it what it is . . . We are becoming conscious of our language as of our

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

Empire, and our virtue was our unconsciousness. . . . The best and most English instinct is still that of resistance to change. . . ." The language is healthiest when exercising "the old and noble faculty of compromise".<sup>1</sup>—He might almost have been writing a parody on the English mind.

The old and noble faculty of compromise, so belauded by Englishmen, so detestable to men of other nations, will no longer serve the turn of all the English-speaking peoples. Something more radical is needed. Certain traditions, prejudices, and proclivities must be sacrificed, certain new principles accepted, certain new and far-reaching liberties conceded. It is possible that no conscious efforts by English-speakers will avail to save the language as a whole; that in fifty or a hundred years the American

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 92, 66, 69, and 68.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

form of it will have broken clean away, and be reckoned almost as distinct a language from English as Spanish is from Portuguese; that Canada, and maybe Australia too, will then be linguistically closer to the States than to England; and that American and not English will be the chief foreign language taught in the schools of Asia and the European Continent.<sup>1</sup> Some Americans look forward to this without misgiving, nay, with exultation; and I for one would rather have it so fall out than see perpetuated and extended that silliest and dwabliest of all the English dialects, Public School Standard.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Some of the German popular *Sprachführer* already appear in separate editions for *Englisch* and *Amerikanisch*; e.g. *Metoula-sprachführer . . . Englisch von Karl Blattner, Ausgabe für Amerikanisch*; and *Polyglott Kuntze: Schnellste Erlernung jeder Sprache ohne Lehrer: Amerikanisch*.

<sup>2</sup> This term, which will appear often in the pages that follow, is not of my coining. Mr

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

But another and I think more desirable event may be conceived of, though whether it is probable none can yet predict. Scotsmen, Irishmen, Welshmen, Englishmen who reject

Daniel Jones, in his authoritative work, *A Phonetic Dictionary of the English Language*, denotes the standard pronunciation by the initials P.S.P., i.e. Public School Pronunciation; and Professor H. C. Wyld, who prefers the term 'Received Standard English' and insists that this is "essentially a *Class Dialect*", adds: "If we were to say that Received English at the present day is Public School English, we should not be far wrong." (*A History of Modern Colloquial English*, pp. 2-3.) Dr Robert Bridges, from whose S.P.E. tract *On English Homophones*, I shall soon have occasion to borrow freely, uses the term 'Southern English'; but this is misleading, for reasons which he notes himself. "It is well enough to record a dialect," he says, speaking of the work of Mr Daniel Jones, "nor will any one grudge him credit for his observation and diligence, but to reduce a dialect to theoretic laws and then impose these laws upon the speakers of it is surely a monstrous step. And in this particular instance the matter is complicated by the fact that Southern English is not truly a natural dialect . . . it is a 'fashionable' speech, fashionable that is in two senses; and Mr Jones would fashion it." *Op. cit.*, pp. 38-9.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

Public School Standard, Canadians, Australians, South Africans, and New Zealanders, may come more or less consciously to an agreement with Americans that the English language shall be maintained as an organic whole, despite dialectal differences; and that it shall be helped everywhere to develop freely in accordance with the natural laws of human speech in general, and the peculiar habits and whigmaleeries of English speech in particular. The mechanical aids to unity—newspapers, rapid transport, the telegraph, broadcasting—are not in themselves strong enough to arrest disintegration, if disintegration is willed by human beings; but if integration is willed instead, the mechanical aids to it must become more powerful every day. Given, on the one hand, a relatively compact body of Englishmen, very imperfectly educated at English public schools, possessed by a silly belief

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

that they should not think at all about their language or their empire, and snobbishly despising every neologism or simplification in grammar that originates from America, and every pronunciation that diverges from their own slovenly standard; and, on the other, a much larger body of Americans, hardly better educated perhaps, but freer from snobbery and in all but their politics freer from prejudice, who are determined to hack their way through the language, as their ancestors through forests, regardless of the valuable growths that may be sacrificed in blazing the trail; given, besides, Scotsmen pitifully aping the English and indifferent to what was once the Scots language and is now but a collection of dwindling and impoverished dialects; Irishmen who, out of political spite, attempt to revive a language, Erse, that might

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

well have been let die with the dodo ; South Africans romantically trying to combine English with an illiterate and debased form of Dutch in their national education ; Canadians who talk high-flown punk about the British Empire in American idioms ; and Australians and New Zealanders damning obsolescent England with a Cockney accent—given these, and nothing else, and English is doomed as a single, vital and effective tongue. All the mechanical devices in the world cannot save it. But given, on the contrary, a few hundred men and women in each country who believe it worth maintaining as a single, vital, and effective tongue, and who are willing to do what to an Englishman like Mr de Sélincourt seems rather bad form, namely, take a little thought about it—and I for one believe the thing is possible.

All that is needful in the first place



## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

is that these few hundreds in each country should realize the problem created by the vast extension in numbers and space of English-speaking people and should desire the problem to be solved in the only way a problem ever is—by the exercise of reason. If they do, they will at once set about learning something of the history of their language. Fortunately, this isn't the dull study it is often reputed to be. They will get a deal of fun out of it. And when they are tired of reading about Anglo-Saxon, and Northumbrian, and Norman French, they will begin collecting American slang from the latest novels and comic strips. They will take a deep delight in the past enrichment of English through its own astonishing powers of reproduction and its bland effrontery in borrowing from every other language under the sun. They will also delight in its growing con-

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

tempt for the flummeries of accidence. And above all they will engage themselves, heart and soul, to help in its further enrichment, its further simplification, a further increase in its flexibility; and in season and out of season they will flout and deride the Priscians and pundits wherever engendered (and especially those engendered in London and Boston, for they are the worst of the deadheads) who would ossify the language by opposing to every improvement in its pronunciation, spelling, accidence, syntax, or vocabulary, their own unimaginative "instinct of resistance to change" which Mr de Sélincourt cracks up as an English ideal.

The process by which a language grows or decays is not mysterious, though complex, and difficult to follow in detail. A language grows or decays through the conscious, semi-conscious, or subconscious actions of individual

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

men and women. Talk about 'the Genius of the Language', even when it is wise, temperate, and well-informed talk, as in Mr Logan Pearsall Smith's brilliant little book *The English Language* in the Home University Library series, is seldom helpful, and, at worst, degenerates into crude animism. New words and phrases are coined by individual men and women, and nowadays nearly always consciously and of set purpose ; and they are given currency by their use on the lips of other individual men and women. Old words and phrases are forgotten because individual men or women cease to use them : this process may be quite deliberate, as when certain London editors drove out the word *aviator* by always printing *airman* instead,<sup>1</sup> or when a number of people suddenly become fed up with a slang

At least, so the story goes. I do not vouch for its truth.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

phrase like *fed up* and resolve to give it the go-by in future ; or it may be semi-conscious, as when many avoid a word because its right pronunciation is doubtful or because it has acquired an obscene meaning ; or it may be unconscious, as when the thing signified by a word drops out of use and the word drops out along with it.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the foolish niceties of accidence, so dear to grammarians of the old school, are lost because individual men and women cannot be bothered with them ; and under modern conditions of universal education this can hardly be unconscious, at least to begin with. And so it goes on from year to year and century to century. A language in a healthy state is perpetually changing, since it is perpetually being brought up to date. The only languages that do not change

<sup>1</sup> *Hansom* and *four-wheeler* and (thank God !) *D.O.R.A.* are going.

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

are those already dead, like Sanscrit, Latin, and classical Greek. Even Public School Standard English still shows faint signs of life, despite the prayers for its early death put up by millions of English-speakers all over the world, and despite Mr Daniel Jones's attempt to bury it in the pages of his *Phonetic Dictionary*.

Changes in a language, then, are nearly always conscious and deliberate to begin with—at least, in the present age of universal education. It is habit that is unconscious, and the learning of a new habit or the breaking of an old, that is willed. Nor does it nowadays require very many people to will a new habit of speech for this to catch on and spread through millions in a month or two; the prevalence of special pieces of slang (*dope*, and *the answer's a lemon*), clichés (*the acid test*, *all in the day's work*, and *in the ascendant*) and what Mr Fowler neatly

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

calls vogue-words (*amazing*, *unthinkable*, *foreword*, and *vision*), proves that. Let half a dozen London, and half a dozen English provincial, newspapers agree never to spell *doubt* with a *b* again,<sup>1</sup> and in six months most of us would have forgotten that we ever did.

It is therefore not so fantastic as it seems, to propose that the English-speaking people of the British Empire (estimated at something like 100,000,000) should agree with the English-speaking people of the United States and Dependencies (estimated at about the same figure) on the general lines that the developing language shall follow. We need not persuade all the 200,000,000. We need not persuade even a two-thousandth part of them. All that is necessary is that a few hundreds in each country should consciously desire to preserve the unity,

<sup>1</sup> The *b* is pure pedantry anyhow ; the Middle English form was *douten*.

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

without sacrificing the diversity, of English speech, and should liberally and intelligently adopt improvements of it that originate no matter where.<sup>1</sup> The few hundreds will leaven each their own lump. Most of what they consciously adopt and propagate their neighbours will subconsciously accept.

It is not uniformity we want, but unity of spirit and intention, an organic unity that tolerates the widest differences.

### § 2

Whether any joint council, society, or other organization, representing the British Isles, the Dominions, and the United States, could be of much use

<sup>1</sup> Most of the improvements are likely to come from America. We on this side of the Atlantic will be wise to take them over with a good grace.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

towards maintaining the unity of English, is doubtful. The mischief is that organizations nearly always get into the wrong hands. The Society for Pure English in England, despite its inauspicious name, has done a great deal of splendid work, but only because it happened to be founded by, and to have remained under, the control of men like Dr Bridges, Mr L. P. Smith, and Mr H. W. Fowler. This was a fortunate and very rare accident. In wrong hands it would have long ago become a dreadful curse, a veritable Inquisition and Congregation of the Propaganda rolled into one. And I'm afraid that that, or something very like it, is just what any similar society would become in America. For in America, apart from lone stalwarts like Mr H. L. Mencken, whose opinions on the language, though bold, are generally sound, the only people likely to hold office in such a



## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

society are Anglomaniac professors of English and certain well-intentioned but misguided amateurs. Few of these have so far taken the stick by the right end, and some of them, to judge by their *obiter dicta*, are as scholastically minded as the dismalest snob of a housemaster in an English public school.

This pedantry, this schoolmarmery, afflicting otherwise intelligent Americans, was displayed at the International Conference on English that met at the Royal Society of Literature in June 1927. According to the newspaper reports—which are all I have to go on—some at least of the English representatives talked sense; Professor Dover Wilson and Mr J. C. Squire especially. On the other hand the Chairman, Mr Robert Underwood Johnson, Secretary to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and formerly U.S. Ambassador to Italy,

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

seems to have been cut to the heart by the growing use of *who* for *whom* in ordinary speech; and another American, Dr Henry S. Canby, fussed about the usage *he don't*, which, so he said, was fouling the language worse than the cannibalism of *who*. To which the only suitable answer is in American—Punk! Every sensible English-speaker on both sides of the Atlantic says *Who were you talking to?* and the sooner we begin to write it the better. *Whom* is a relic of the bad old days when inflections were cherished for their own sake, and there is no more reason for retaining it than for retaining *these* and *those* as plural forms of *this* and *that*. Similarly with *does* and its ungainly negative *doesn't*. We have already got rid of *doth*; why not despatch *does* after it? *I*, *you*, *we*, and *they* do very well with *do*, and so could *he*, *she*, and *it*.

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

The Conference ended by passing the following resolution :

“ It is agreed to form an international Council for English with reference to the problems of the common language of the English-speaking countries. This Council is to be an investigating body which will consider facts as to disputed usage and other questions of language in the various English-speaking countries, and give the results of its investigations the widest possible publicity : in short, will maintain the traditions and foster the development of our common tongue.”

A worthy aim ; let us hope the Council hits it. For my part, I am not very sanguine. The actual wording of the resolution is none too happy, and I'm afraid the Council, instead of maintaining the traditions of English and fostering its development, is more likely to maintain the traditions of officials and grammarians, and to strengthen the hands of schoolmasters

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

by stereotyping present absurdities (like *whom* and *does*), and by introducing new ones. That, as sure as eggs is eggs, is what it will do if the American representatives are like Mr Johnson and Dr Canby, and if the representatives of the British Empire are chosen exclusively, or even mainly, from those who speak, write, and think in Public School Standard. A small group of writers, who would meet once in six months for dinner, but on no account ever do any business when they met, and who would consist of, say, Mr Bernard Shaw, Dr Bridges, Mr James Joyce, Mr Edwin Muir, and Miss Rose Macaulay, as the representatives of the British Empire, and Mr Mencken, Mr Sinclair Lewis, Mr Cabell, Mr Ring W. Lardner, and Miss Hilda Dolittle ('H.D.'), as the representatives of America, with perhaps Mr T. S. Eliot as a neutral chairman—such a group would do more to unify,

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

spoken in our 4,039,000 square miles of territory, except as spoken by foreigners."

"From Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon," said an English writer in *The Westminster Review* in 1888, "no trace of a distinct dialect can be found."

"This uniformity," says Mr Mencken, from whose book *The American Language* I have borrowed these quotations, "is especially marked in vocabulary and grammatical forms—the foundation stones of a living speech. There may be slight differences in pronunciation and intonation—a Southern softness, a Yankee drawl, a Western burr—but in the words they use and the way they use them all Americans, even the least tutored, follow the same line. One observes, of course, a polite speech and a common speech. But the common speech is everywhere the same, and its uniform vagaries take the place of the dialectic variations of other lands."<sup>1</sup>

The same is obviously not yet true of the British Isles ; perhaps it never

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, (1922), pp. 28, 29, 30.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

will be. Skeat distinguished nine dialects in Scotland, three in Ireland, and thirty in England and Wales.<sup>1</sup> Yet even in Great Britain, with its thirty-nine dialects, a remarkable degree of uniformity in speech has been laid upon the people in the last fifty years, chiefly by compulsory education. We hear complaints on every hand that children are being taught to speak a bastard tongue, which is neither standard English nor their own local dialect but combines the faults of both. Dialects are vanishing quicker than philologists can record them, nor does any pure dialect exist any longer in the British Isles. Folk move about so much that the dialects are getting all mixed up, and one may expect to come on Aberdonian forms in Devon, and Cheshire forms in Kent.

Still more marked is the growing

<sup>1</sup> *English Dialects from the Eighth Century to the Present Day*, Cambridge, 1911.

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

uniformity of speech among people who have enjoyed more than an elementary education. It does not yet equal the uniformity to be found in America, since the educated Scotsman may still be easily distinguished from the educated Irishman, and both of these from the educated Englishman. But a listener must possess a trained and pretty quick ear to tell what part of Scotland or Ireland an educated speaker comes from, and no matter how well-trained his ear he will make more incorrect guesses than correct if he tries to place an Englishman speaking Public School Standard.

As to the self-governing Dominions, I am not competent to say anything with assurance. It would appear, however, that so far as there is any standard speech in Canada it is approximating closer every day to American, which is just what we should *a priori*

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

expect ; and that the standard speech of South Africa, New Zealand, and, most of all, Australia, is going more and more Cockney. But since pronunciation has not yet reached stability in any Dominion they may all be ignored in the present discussion.

Ignoring them, therefore, and considering only the speech of the educated classes, we may say there are four main standard pronunciations for English : Public School Standard (sometimes called Southern English), Scots Standard, Irish Standard, and American Standard. Each is *received*, in the sense in which Professor Wyld uses the term, within its own area or sphere of influence, and tolerated (more or less) outside. An educated Englishman who speaks with a noticeable Newcastle or Manchester or Nottingham accent is socially at a disadvantage among those who speak Public School Standard ; he is required to prove his



## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

intellectual status in some other way than by his tongue before he is accepted ; and even after he has proved it his friends will continue to say : ' Brown's a good chap, but I do wish he would learn to speak English properly.' Whereas a Scotsman or Irishman or American speaking his own Standard is accepted with little or no hesitation.

Of the four, only the first, Public School Standard, has ever put forward a claim to be *the* Standard, and thus to take precedence of the other three. This claim is still being made. It is countenanced in every dictionary published in England, even in the best of all the recent small ones, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* ; it is tacitly assumed by nearly every writer on the language save Americans, and apparently by some Anglomaniac Americans as well ; and it is recognized by teachers of English on the Continent, who drill

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

their pupils in this, the most slovenly of all the ways of speaking English, in the fond belief that it alone is correct. It has been challenged again and again, and by writers who deserve to be listened to,<sup>1</sup> but it is still far from being overthrown.

True, no one seriously tries nowadays to impose Public School Standard on Americans, though Englishmen who speak it can still be sometimes heard fleeing at Americans who don't. Nor would it be any use if someone did try, since not only will the bulk of Americans have none of it, but they could not

<sup>1</sup> Notably to Dr Bridges, the Poet Laureate, whose challenge gains in force by his admission that he still speaks "the bad Southern English" that he learnt "as a child and at school". Obviously, it is in the schools that reform is most urgently needed. By the time a boy leaves an English Public School his pronunciation is generally fixed for life. He *may* be able to change it later, but only if, by something like a miracle, his language ear has not been destroyed by his Public School education.

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

if they would. While they might by diligence acquire its pronunciation of separate syllables, their intonation must always remain different, for reasons that neither nation has any control over.

"The nasal twang which Englishmen observe in the *vox Americana*," says Mr Mencken, "though it has high overtones, is itself not high pitched, but rather low pitched, as all constrained and muffled tones are apt to be. The causes of that twang have long engaged phonologists, and in the main they agree that there is a physical basis for it—that our generally dry climate and rapid changes of temperature produce an actual thickening of the membranes concerned in the production of sound. We are, in brief, a somewhat snuffling people, and much more given to catarrhs and coryzas than the inhabitants of damp Britain."<sup>1</sup>

In which connection it is worthy of note that Englishmen who live long

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 208.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

abroad in a climate similar to that of Canada and the States often acquire in the end something faintly like an American twang ; and that in the second generation this is even more marked.<sup>1</sup>

American Standard, then, has established itself, and whether we who are not Americans like it or not, it must be left to its own speakers to do what they please with. A full discussion of it here is impossible, but a few of the most important points in which it differs from Public School Standard may be noted. These are :

- (i) Its intonation ;
- (ii) Its clearer articulation of the various syllables in long words ;
- (iii) Its reluctance—one can hardly call it more than that—to

<sup>1</sup> I speak with direct experience only of North China.

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

shift the accent forward in words of more than two syllables ;

(iv) Its tendency to throw a secondary accent on one of the later syllables ;

(v) Its marked preference for the flat *a* ;

(vi) Its reluctance to diphthongize long *o* ;

(vii) Its reluctance to ignore completely an orthographic *r* ;

(viii) Its reluctance to voice the sound *wh*.

(i). Quite apart from its 'twang' American Standard is flatter in intonation than either Public School Standard or Irish Standard, and, in this respect at least, resembles Scots Standard.

" Perhaps the most apparent general characteristic of American speech, so far as cadence is concerned, is its levelness

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

of tone. The voice rises and falls within a relatively narrow range, and with few abrupt transitions from high to low or low to high. To British ears American speech often sounds hesitating, monotonous and indecisive, and British speech, on the other hand, is likely to seem to Americans abrupt, explosive and manneristic. Both habits of speech, it need scarcely be said, are established by convention, and one is not more conscious or affected than the other."<sup>1</sup>

It is clear, however, that this flatness of tone in both American Standard and Scots Standard is a positive disadvantage. It marks a failure to make full use of one of the subtlest and quickest means of conveying shades of meaning in conversation.

(ii), (iii), and (iv). These really go together. Words like *necessarily*, *secretary*, *Birmingham*, which in Public School Standard are accented on the first syllable and then shuffled off as

<sup>1</sup> G. P. Krapp, *The Pronunciation of Standard English in America*, p. 50.

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

though what remained of the word didn't matter a damn, and words like *declamatory* and *obligatory*, which are normally<sup>1</sup> accented on the second syllable and then shuffled off as before, are in American Standard taken more slowly and given their full weight, the accent being either thrown back, as in *necessárilý*, *secretáry*, or duplicated, as in *declámatóry* and *Bírmíngghám*. The word *extraordinary* gives a good measure of the difference between the two Standards. The Public School Standard pronunciation of this word may be represented without parody as *íkstráwdnry*, whereas in American Standard every single letter is given its proper value and a strong accent is thrown on the penultimate syllable.

It must be admitted, however, that in shorter words the same tendency appears in both Standards, viz., to throw the accent forward ; and that in

<sup>1</sup> *Óbligatory* is permissible.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

this respect American Standard has sometimes anticipated its English rival. The accenting of the first syllable in words like *adult*, *alloy*, *ally*, *details*, *inquiry*, *mamma*, *papa*, and *recess*, though it may not be officially recognized yet in American dictionaries, is already much commoner in the States than in England.<sup>1</sup>

(v). Next to intonation and 'twang', the flat *a* is probably the thing in American speech that an English ear notices most often. The first time an Englishman hears an American pronounce the place-names *Alabáma*, *Colorádo*, *Neváda*, *Nebráska*, and *Montána*, in all of which the accented *a* is flat (as in *can*), he is pulled up with a round turn. Apparently the purists in America, foolishly

<sup>1</sup> Since this was first written the B.B.C. Committee in England has recommended *ádukt*. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, however, definitely recommends *adúkt*, and this is the pronunciation oftenest followed by speakers of Public School Standard. The other is bound to come.



## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

aping Public School Standard and influenced by usage in New England, have tried to discredit this characteristic American *a*, but without success ; the Americans *will* have it. And why in heaven's name shouldn't they ? It represents, as Mr Krapp very properly says, a natural habit of speech " which is inherently just as good as the one by which the purist would supplant it ".<sup>1</sup>

(vi). As to long *o* Mr Krapp says :

" This sound is much less diphthongal in American than in British speech. In the latter a great variety of diphthongal shadings occur, some of them familiar in the exaggerated representations of Englishmen and their speech on the American stage. In the speech of many, perhaps of most Americans, there is scarcely any trace of diphthongal quality in the sound ".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82. By British speech Mr Krapp of course, here as elsewhere, means Public School Standard. Long *o* is seldom diphthongized in Scots Standard or Irish Standard.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

(vii). Americans are given to claiming that they always pronounce the *r*. Mr Krapp's phonetic investigations do not quite bear this out. In certain positions, *i.e.* at the end of a word and before another consonant, orthographic *r* is ignored by many Americans, as it is by all speakers of Public School Standard. By many Americans—but not by all.

"In all regions of the United States, especially away from the Atlantic seaboard, an orthographic *r* commonly has phonetic value before consonants and when final. Whether one calls this sound which is heard a consonant or not is of little importance, provided the existence and quality of the sound itself are recognised."<sup>1</sup>

(viii). By voicing the sound *wh* is meant what we commonly call 'leaving out the *h*', in words like *which*, *when*, and *why*. This is the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

official pronunciation for Public School Standard, but is very properly objected to by Scotsmen and Irishmen. Americans agree with the latter, and in American Standard *wh* is voiceless ; that is to say, *wh* is not pronounced as if it were a plain *w*.

Well, there it is, American Standard, firmly fixed, well documented, nationally adopted, practically independent of what obtains on this side of the Atlantic, borrowing nothing from England, lending very little to it. It is the second best of the four Standards.

What of the other three, Irish, Scots, and Public School English ? Ought we to retain each for its own area, or gradually eliminate two of them ? And if the latter, which two ?

For my part I can see no advantage, and many disadvantages, in retaining more than one Standard for educated people in the British Isles, and I would accordingly welcome the setting up of one, which everybody could accept,

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

every school teach, and every broadcasting station popularize by regular phonetic 'talks'. But one thing is clear: this single Standard must not be the one now officially countenanced and propagated through English dictionaries. Public School Standard is a gross travesty of English speech, and the sooner it is eliminated and forgotten the better.

Practically the only virtue it can boast is its variety of intonation, and this it shares with Irish Standard. For the rest, it is artificial, slovenly to a degree, absurdly difficult for foreigners to acquire, and, except to ears debased by listening to it, inharmonious. It obliterates distinctions, tends to reduce all unstressed vowels to the same neutral grunt, and then—as if by some obscure process of psychical compensation—diphthongizes and breaks up vowels that in other Standards are cleanly and simply articulated. In some respects it is already so slovenly

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

that telephone operators and broadcasting announcers have to depart from it in order that listeners may be sure of catching what is said. In brief, it is just about as bad a form of English speech as it could well be.

Consider *r*. The number of ways in which this sound may be uttered is considerable, as every student of languages knows. Even in English, phoneticians distinguish several varieties, such as *voiced dental rolled*, *semi-rolled*, and *voiced dental fricative*. A certain variety is welcome, provided we avoid extremes like the hard *r* in Russian and the uvular *r* in French.<sup>1</sup> But Public School Standard has completely silenced *r* whenever it is terminal in a word or followed by another consonant. Thus *law* and *lore*, *paw* and *pore*, *saw* and *sore*, *gnaw* and *nor* become each a pair of exact homophones, and in a phonetic

<sup>1</sup> Which, however, is the normal dialectal *r* in Northumberland and North Durham, and constitutes the Northumbrian burr.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

dictionary like Mr Jones's are so represented ; and nothing is easier than to make up parodies on the language like : ' I sore the sawcerer sore his saw leg with a sawed, make it roar, and make the paw fellow raw with pain.'

There is no virtue in the sound *r*, as such ; a man who rolls or semi-rolls it does not thereby acquire merit in this world or the next. But if the letter occurs as often in a language as *r* does in English, it is plain common-sense to pronounce it in some fashion and sheer folly not to pronounce it at all. Because every time a distinctive sound is dropped out of a language, that language is impoverished and worsened, the number of exact or approximate homophones being increased and, by the same stroke, the chances of ambiguity increased when the language is spoken.

By the voicing of *wh*, too, Public School Standard has needlessly

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

increased the number of homophones in English. *Witch* is now indistinguishable in sound from *which*, *wen* from *when*, *wear* from *where*, and *wight* from *white*.

Whoever is inclined to say this does not matter, let him read Dr Bridges's tract *On English Homophones*, the sectional headings of which are :

1. Homophones are a nuisance.
2. They are exceptionally frequent in English.
3. They are self-destructive, and tend to become obsolete.
4. This loss impoverishes the language.
5. This impoverishment is now proceeding owing to the prevalence of the Southern English standard of speech.
6. The mischief is being worsened and propagated by the phoneticians.
7. The Southern English dialect has no claim to exclusive preference.

Under No. 7 Dr Bridges says :

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

" I do not pretend to foresee the future, nor even to desire it in any particular form ; but it seems to me probable that if the ' P. S. P ' [Public School Pronunciation] continues its downward course as indicated by Mr Jones, then, unless everything else worsens with it, so that it might maintain its relative flotation in a general confusion, it must fall to be disesteemed and repudiated, and give place to one or more other dialects which, by having better preserved the distinctions of pronunciation, will be not only more convenient vehicles of intercourse, but more truthful and intelligible interpreters of our great literature. . . . There is as much fashion as inevitable law in our ' P. S. P. ' or ' S. E. ' talk, and if the fashion for a better, that is, a more distinct and conservative, pronunciation should set in, then at the cost of a little temporary self-consciousness we might, in one generation, or at least in two, have things again very much as they were in Shakespeare's day."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The average Englishman is inclined to think that the dangers and disadvantages of homophony are much exaggerated by 'cranks'.



## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

On nearly every count, then, Public School Standard must be condemned, and I for one believe it is past mending. Let us agree to wipe it out.

As between Scots Standard and Irish Standard, no one who is free from national prejudice can hesitate an instant. Irish Standard, as spoken by

But anyone who has spoken a monosyllabic language knows what a curse homophony can be when carried to excess. In Chinese (Pekingese Mandarin dialect), for example, the number of possible sounds (neglecting the 'tones') is only 398. That is to say, the number of possible words *as heard by the ear* is only 398, since no word consists of more than one syllable. Such a state of affairs being obviously intolerable, the Chinese have been forced to quadruple each sound artificially, by means of 'tones' or inflections of the voice, in order to mark differences of meaning. Even at that the possibilities of ambiguity when the language is spoken are very great indeed. Even so simple a sentence as *Pu yao chi* may, according to slight differences in intonation which to the *untrained* European ear are indistinguishable, mean: (a) *(I) don't want the chicken*, (b) *Don't bite the chicken*, (c) *Don't get impatient*, (d) *Don't shove*, or (e) *(I) don't want to make a note of (it)*.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

the educated classes in Dublin, is as pure and harmonious a form of English as the heart of man could desire. Its intonation is as varied and flexible as that of Public School Standard, and its articulation of separate syllables as careful as the best American. Each syllable is given its proper value, vowels are clearly marked and distinguished one from another without silly diphthongization, consonants are sharp—maybe a little too sharp sometimes, but that is a fault easily remedied—every *r* is sounded without exaggeration, and *wh* is never voiced. At the same time there is none of the harshness of Scots Standard.<sup>1</sup>

We must not suppose that Irish Standard would ever be spoken so charmingly by the bulk of Englishmen

<sup>1</sup> After Dublin, the next best English in the British Isles is spoken, curiously enough, in and around Inverness, but alas ! not by many thousand people.

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

and Scotsmen as it now is by Irishmen ; national habit and temperament must be allowed for. But even if it was spoken only passably, it would still be a marked improvement on the existing tongues of Great Britain. Moreover, if Irish Standard became the accepted Standard for the whole of the British Isles there is more than a chance that Americans would pay it respect. Their present contempt for what they call ' British speech ' is entirely justified ; but they have no similar feeling against Irish.

Is the imposition of Irish Standard on the educated classes of Great Britain impossible ? Surely not. Dr Bridges has pointed out how ' fashionable ' (in two senses) Public School Standard is. It has no root in the soil, as, for example, Scots Standard has. Through the public schools chiefly, and through the universities to a less degree, it could be refashioned into almost

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

anything. Scots Standard might present more difficulties, but even this is changing and might well be encouraged to change more rapidly. Let Irish Standard be phonetically recorded in as good a dictionary as Mr Daniel Jones has made for the debased speech of educated Englishmen ; let departments of phonetics as efficient as Mr Jones's be established in the Irish universities ; encourage teachers from schools in Great Britain to spend one or two vacations in the Irish Free State with their ears open, and make a small grant to every one who takes a course in Irish phonetics ; subsidize a few companies of Irish players (like those from the Abbey Theatre in Dublin) to tour England and Scotland ; replace the present announcers at all B.B.C. stations by carefully picked Irishmen ; and remove from the present B.B.C. Committee on pronunciation all except Mr George Bernard Shaw, who

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

pronounces English as well as he writes it—and in less than two generations Public School Standard would be as dead as Norman French. It need not cost the taxpayer as much as a new destroyer for the Navy.

### § 4

The reform of English spelling must wait for the reform of English pronunciation. To reform it now, while the dictionary-makers are still countenancing Public School Standard, would be a calamity.

### § 5

As to English accidence, reform is bound to come slowly at best, but anything we can do to hasten it will be a

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

public benefaction. For though English has got rid of most of the inflections that burdened its youth a few still remain, and of these the majority could now be discarded without loss.

Inflections in a language simply aren't needed.<sup>1</sup> One or two may be a convenience, a means of avoiding clumsy periphrases; but only when the language has failed to throw up the suitable auxiliaries. The habit of English-speakers being to use the pret-erite much oftener than, for instance, the French do, it is perhaps desirable to keep *-ed* or *-t* as the sign of the

<sup>1</sup> How difficult it is to drive this idea into the heads of scholars, especially of classical scholars! Of all the international languages manufactured at one time or another in Europe only the latest, Peano's Interlingua, seems to have been bold enough to discard all inflections in the verb. Esperanto is quite heavily inflected, and in Ido we find the following—and, for ought I know, more—variations on the stem *skrib* of the verb *to write*: *skribos*, *skribanta*, *skribabos*, *skribinta*, *skribonta*, *skribata*, *skribesos*, and *skribita*. *Insanabile grammaticorum cacoethes!*

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

preterite in English verbs ; but if we could get into the habit of using the perfect (*e.g. I have looked*) on all occasions where we now use the preterite (*I looked*), even this inflection could be dropped ; *I have look* and *I have go* are inherently just as good, because just as unambiguous, as *I have looked* and *I have gone*.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps desirable, too, to have some simple means of denoting plural number in nouns, and -s is as good a way of doing it as any. The sign 's is a neat device to mark possessives, though French gets along without anything similar. *Whose* is a handy variant of *who*, though *of who* would be better, especially since English idiom encourages the preposition-at-end, and *of who* would there-

<sup>1</sup> That the distinction between the preterite and the perfect is hardly needed is shown by modern colloquial usage in French. Colloquially, *j'ai regardé* and *je suis allé* replace *je regardai* and *j'allai* even when the past in which the action took place is quite definite.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

fore often appear as *who . . . of*. Certain irregular (strong or vocalic) preterites have diverged slightly in meaning from their present tenses, as *would* from *will*, *might* from *may*, and *could* from *can*, and had better be retained as separate words. But all these are of the nature of luxuries. We *could* do without them, and in a language like Chinese one has to. In Chinese each word remains the same on all occasions: variations in meaning are conveyed by syntax, that is by the order of the words and the use of certain common auxiliaries or particles, some of which, though in fact separate words, are heard as enclitic; past tense is denoted either adverbially (*yesterday, last year, already*) or by the use of the auxiliary *liao* or some other auxiliary denoting *accomplishment*; number in nouns is not indicated at all; and needless to say there is no such grammatical absurdity as



## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

gender.<sup>1</sup> The same ease and simplicity could be attained in English if only we would relegate our few remaining grammatical fossils to the proper place for fossils, our museums.

In this as in other respects we have now become a conservative people, whereas formerly we were much the most progressive and radical in the world. It is one of the subsidiary results of education not carried far enough. We have all spent a deal of time and mental energy on getting the distinction between *I* and *me*, *who* and *whom*, *know* and *knew* and *known*, firmly into our heads, and it's little wonder the phrases *between you and I*, *I seen him*, *says I sharplike*, and *he knowed what us wants* tend to make us squirm. Many of us, I fear, desire the retention of grammatical difficulties chiefly from snobbery: the ability 'to speak good grammar'

<sup>1</sup> And, very curiously, no relative pronoun.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

raises us above the vulgar herd. Others happily forget how long it took them to master even the simple accident of English, and so cannot see why the common people should have difficulty in it. Well, the common people have. And so in our childhood had we, who are now alleged to be educated and therefore common people no more. And the mischief is that half our difficulties, and theirs, are needless. If every remaining inflection disappeared from English to-morrow, we should have learned in a few months how to avoid every possible ambiguity due to the loss.

I have already mentioned Mr Robert Underwood Johnson's disgust at the cannibalism of *who*. He seemed to think the vice was recent, till Professor Dover Wilson pointed out to him that Shakespeare was a chief offender. As a matter of fact, however, *who* has been trying to devour *whom*

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

for centuries—*Who do you mean?* was already current in Early Middle English—and has only been prevented from swallowing it up completely by misguided grammarians. Similarly, *between you and I* is of old standing. In Early Middle English, says Sweet, “you and I were so frequently joined together as nominatives—*you and I will go together* etc.—that the three words formed a sort of group-compound, whose last element became invariable.”<sup>1</sup> Nominatives have always shown a tendency to devour their objectives,<sup>2</sup> and, now that we have gained a more sensible view of grammar than was held in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they ought in future to be actively encouraged in this gruesome but desirable work. Further, irregular plurals like *oxen*

<sup>1</sup> *New English Grammar*, Part 1, p. 340.

<sup>2</sup> The objective *you*, however, resisted, and in the end succeeded in devouring its nominative *ye*.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

and *sheep*, and Latin plurals like *curricula* should be regularized at once (*oxes, sheeps, curriculums*).<sup>1</sup> As to verbs, the -s of the third person singular indicative should be gradually dropped as unnecessary, much as we have already dropped its Southern-English predecessor -*th*; the present participle and verb-noun in -*ing* might usefully be kept for a time, since many English idioms depend on it, but it ought to be sacrificed in the end; and so-called vocalic verbs (e.g. *bind*, making *bound*, *bound*, and *begin*, making *began*, *begun*) should be gradually transformed, as every child now does till he is mistaught better, into consonantal verbs making -*ed*, -*ed* (or -*t*, -*t*) in the preterite and past participle—that is to say, for as long as we resolve to keep preterites and past participles at all.

Such improvements, I fear, will

<sup>1</sup> *Cows* has already eaten up *kine*.

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

come but slowly. The old pedantic grammarians, stogged to the neck in Latin, have done their work too well, for they have induced in nine out of ten educated Englishmen to-day a greater fear of committing a solecism in grammar than of committing one of the seven deadly sins. The result is that grammarians of the modern school—like Professor Otto Jespersen, one of the most learned, yet wisest, of men—are forced to waste nearly half their days in clearing away the rubbish deposited by their predecessors in the minds of our contemporary schoolmasters, and in persuading the rest of us of the simple truth that grammar has no intrinsic value, but acquires such minor value as it does have, only in so far as it makes, by the shortest and quickest route, for ease, clarity, and flexibility in human speech.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

### § 6

On most questions of English syntax Mr. H. W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* is the best book ever written. I wish now to discuss only three points, all briefly, and only because, for one reason or another, I disagree with Mr Fowler on them.

As behoves a judicially-minded Englishman, Mr Fowler does not come down heavily on either side in the dispute about 'the split infinitive'. His advice might be summed up thus: Don't make a fuss either for or against the split infinitive; if you have to split, split; but you will generally find that you needn't.

Sound advice—if we could wipe the slate clean of all that the old-school grammarians have written on the subject. But we can't. By some strange accident even our harmless friend, the man in the street, has

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

heard of this wild beast, the split infinitive, and is on his guard lest it come upon him unawares in his daily avocations. I have known men who lived in positive dread of it, who lay awake o' nights haunted by a suspicion that it had crept into their business letters during the day. In kindness to these spectre-ridden boobs I would urge all writers for some years to regularly and without compunction split every infinitive that comes their way—even in letters to *The Times*. If the man in the street can only grow accustomed to seeing it again and again in the best company he may realize that it is not after all a fearsome beast, like Topsell's Lamia, but, at worst, only a Phairy; and as to Phairies, Topsell assures us that they

“ Arise from the præstigious apparitions of Devils, whose delight is to deceive and beguile the minds of men with errorr, contrary to the truths of holye scripture

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

which doeth no where make mention of such inchaunting creatures ; and therefore if any such be, we will holde them the workes of the Devill and not of God."

And now about two other Phairies—  
*shall and will.*

"One of the most elaborate and wonderful achievements of the Genius of the Language in modern times," says Mr Logan Pearsall Smith, "is the differentiation of the uses of *shall* and *will*, a distinction not observed by earlier writers, and so complicated that it can hardly be mastered by those born in parts of the British Islands in which it has not yet been established."<sup>1</sup>

Presumably Mr Fowler was born in the right part of the British Islands, for he is in the know, he has been permitted to spy into this Eleusinian mystery, and he has divulged it—in six and a half columns of *Modern English Usage*. For my part, I do not understand it, and never shall

<sup>1</sup> *The English Language*, p. 29.



## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

(or will). But I confess that I am not greatly disturbed thereat, since I find myself in very good and very numerous company—about 95 per cent. of the English-speaking people in the world. Scotsmen will have none of this wire-drawn academic flapdoodle about *shall* and *will*, *should* and *would*; neither will Irishmen, Americans, or the great majority of Englishmen; so it may safely be handed over to Oxford and Cambridge dons to play with for as long a time as it continues to amuse them. It will do them less harm than Croce's *Aesthetic*, which it resembles in dwalminess.

One of the best articles in Mr Fowler's book deals with the relative pronouns *that* and *which*. He begins :

“What grammarians say should be has perhaps less influence on what shall be than even the most modest of them realize; usage evolves itself little disturbed by their likes and dislikes. And yet

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

the temptation to show how better use might have been made of the material to hand is sometimes irresistible. The relations between *that*, *who*, and *which*, have come to us from our forefathers as an odd jumble, and plainly show that the language has not been neatly constructed by a master-builder who could create each part to do the exact work required of it, neither overlapped nor overlapping ; far from that, its parts have had to grow as they could."

He accordingly suggests that English would gain in both lucidity and ease if writers agreed in future to regard *that* as the defining relative pronoun, and *which* as the non-defining. (The difference comes out clearly in his examples : (a) *Each made a list of the books that had influenced him*, and (b) *I always buy his books, which have influenced me greatly*.) He has to admit, however, that this is not now "the practice either of most or of the best writers."

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

This proposed rule of Mr Fowler's is as good as most other rules of syntax that have been laid down for the guidance of English writers—as good, but no better. I'm afraid very few writers will abide by it; because the “odd jumble” of English relatives, so far from being a nuisance, is a great convenience. It gives a choice among three words (or four, if we include *as*), all practically synonymous, yet each very different from the others in sound; and no writer will forgo that choice if he can help it. In fact, it is precisely this quality in English, its richness in exact or approximate synonyms, which gives the English writer such an advantage over writers in other languages.

In putting forward this rule, and indeed throughout his book, Mr Fowler does not make enough allowance for euphony in writing. He pokes fun at the ‘elegant variationist’, who

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

of course deserves it, but he seems, time and again, to forget that all good prose depends in some degree on elegant, though unobtrusive, variation.

"Any one who seriously attempts to write well-sounding English," says Dr Bridges, "will be aware how delicately sensitive our ear is to the repetition of sounds. He will often have found it necessary to change some unimportant word because its unaccented vowel recalled and jarred with another which was perhaps as far as two or three lines removed from it: nor does there seem to be any rule for this, since apparently similar repetitions do not always offend, and may even be agreeable."<sup>1</sup>

I would not suggest that Mr Fowler has not intellectually grasped this elementary principle; no one who writes at all could fail to; but there is evidence all through his book that he does not allow it weight enough.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *On English Homophones*, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> For other examples see the article on "Wardour Street", and wherever Mr Fowler

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

And in this, unhappily, he resembles most other writers on English syntax.<sup>1</sup>

### § 7

There can be little doubt that English has the richest vocabulary of any language in the world. And no wonder, since it has borrowed freely from most of the others. Except to name new material objects (*photograph, magneto, aeroplane*), new

comes upon a word like *belittle*, a recent coinage, which he says was unnecessary. He would have us give up using *save* as a preposition or conjunction because it is archaic. But so long as the alternative is the ugly-sounding *except* not many writers will take his advice. There are sentences that *except* would ruin, and which are effectively saved by *save*.

<sup>1</sup> It is not a case of Mr Fowler's ear against mine, but of Mr Fowler's ear against that of the best English writers. My ear, I confess it with regret, is a poor one.

As to what the practice of English authors in the use of *who*, *that*, and *which*, has been, see Professor Jespersen's *Notes on Relative Clauses*, S.P.E. tract, No. XXIV, Oxford, 1926.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

processes (*motoring, broadcasting*), and new scientific or philosophical concepts (*bacterium, electron, exogamy, prehension*), it is not actually necessary to increase the vocabulary, either by borrowing from abroad or by using native devices for word-making.

Accordingly, many learned and worthy persons would lay it down as a strict rule in writing that an author ought to make the best of the existing tools, ought to use no word that is not included in a standard dictionary. If, they say, he can't find the tool he needs it is only because he hasn't looked for it long enough; the tool is there all right, and a more painstaking search would have found it. And this, though not perhaps accepted doctrine to the leading English philologists, is accepted doctrine to most original writers, most professional critics, and most educated readers in England at the present day. Neolo-

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

gisms, dialectal words, obvious colloquialisms, and slang, are frowned on. Hence many of the attacks on Mr James Joyce, who flouts the rule ; on American writers in general and American novelists in particular, who are much less pernicky than the English about colloquial phrases and slang ; and on many modern French writers, like M. Barbusse and M. Morand, who are said to have no ' literary conscience ' because they are content to take a word from anywhere if it serves their turn. Hence, too, the flatness, the dreary gentility, the wairsh inkhorn flavour, the deliberate preciousness of much even of the best prose now being written in England.

I have just read through again some twenty-five pages of Mr David Garnett's *The Sailor's Return*, scrutinizing the words and idioms he chooses ; I opened the book at random. Within these twenty-five pages (115 to 140)

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

the reader will find straightforward narrative, dialogue put into the mouths of the ex-sailor innkeeper, Tulip his black wife, his sister, his nephew, a prize-fighter, a farmer, and other villagers, together with a long recital by Tulip of the history of her own African tribe. One would *a priori* expect to find a certain amount of dialect—the action takes place in Wessex about 1860—and many expressive colloquial words of the homelier sort ; what one does find throughout is studiously, artificially simple English of the literary sort. From the dialogue I cull the following colloquialisms : *ain't* ; *ain't done nothing* ; *William can lick all that trash* ; *pug* (prize-fighter) ; *quid* (£) ; *come along of me* ; *dungyard bumpkins* ; *that's beastly* ; and *put up your mauleys*—all of which, except the last, may fairly be called inkhorn colloquialisms, with little tang of the soil or the sea about them.



## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

And from the narrative passages I cull the following deliberate archaisms ; *outdoors* as an adverb, and *woken* for *waked* or *wakened*. Here is how Tulip begins her recital of African history :

“ The first of our kings in the written history was Agarjah the Great. There is not much to tell about him except that he defeated everyone, and he was the first to raise an army of women and so make Dahomey into the greatest kingdom in Africa. The names of many of the peoples whom he conquered are now unknown . . . ”

and so on for another four pages, in the course of which she makes use of fourth-form *De-Bello-Gallico* locutions like : *until my father defeated and utterly subdued them ; they captured the town and slew the viceroy ; and his heart failed him, for he was afraid.*

It may be said that I have missed the whole point of Mr Garnett's method ; that he is all the time engaged in a subtle pulling of the reader's

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

leg, and that nothing would better please him than discovering that the leg of one reader at least—me—had been successfully pulled for twenty-five pages. To this I would reply that I can find genuine pleasure in having my leg pulled by Mr Garnett, and that I do not object at all to his method for his special and peculiar purpose. But his style, which within its narrow range is nearly perfect, is as good an example as I know of the present tendency in the best prose-writers of England to shut themselves up in a hothouse and cultivate words. The result is extreme delicacy of rhythm, colour, and pattern at the expense of vigour and of that robust, windy vulgarity to be found on the tops of hills and in the mouths of common, untutored folk.

It is an odd but characteristically-English trait in Public School Standard that it should be slovenly in pro-

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

nunciation and, when written, finical in vocabulary. It ought to be just the reverse. English-speaking people in the world are increasing rapidly, and any pronunciation that makes claim to be a standard should therefore be clear, easy to learn, and reasonably consistent. English-speaking people, even in the old countries of the British Isles, still more in the Dominions and America, are continually being placed in new circumstances and called on to react in new ways, and it is therefore desirable, nay imperative, that their vocabulary should be thoroughly elastic. Such elasticity the Americans at any rate are resolved to have. Wouldn't it be better if we in England tried to keep up with them instead of lagging arrogantly behind and making-believe that English gentlemen are never hustled and never vulgar?

The attitude now fashionable in the educated classes of England towards

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

all Americanisms in speech is smug and ill-informed. The supposed latest American slang—but it's usually the slang of the day before yesterday—is quoted derisively in conversation, and many American idioms that are not slang at all are used facetiously as though they were. Worthy souls write to the papers and complain that the captions of American films are composed in abominable English and are manifestly corrupting the speech of English children. One writer to *The Daily Mail*, quoted by Mr Mencken, opined that movie-talk (but he didn't call it that) "cannot be regarded without serious misgivings, if only because it generates and encourages mental indiscipline so far as the choice of expressions is concerned." (This—in *The Daily Mail*!) A writer in *The Little Review* for September, 1918, Edgar Jepson by name, complained of "this amazing

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

lack of the sense of the beauty of words" among Americans, which, said he, came "from the manner in which the language of the United States is spoken—that monotonous drone, generally nasal, and that monotonous nasal whine." (This—in the country that speaks the slovenliest of all English dialects, Public School Standard!) In reviewing the American translation of a French book Mr J. C. Squire was once petty enough to quarrel with the use of *sidewalk* for *pavement*.<sup>1</sup> And, as if to prove that the English have lost none of their notorious smugness in recent years, one 'W.W.' published in *The New Statesman*, on 25th June, 1927, one of the most arrogantly stupid articles I ever read, from which I extract the following choice specimen :

<sup>1</sup> A very little thought will show any unbiassed person that *sidewalk* is, in fact, a better word than *pavement* for its purpose. *Sidewalk* has only one meaning, *pavement* has several.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

"We do not want to interfere with their [the Americans'] language; why should they seek to interfere with ours? That their huge hybrid population of which only a minority are even racially Anglo-Saxons should use English as their chief means of communication is our misfortune, not our fault. They certainly threaten our language, but the only way in which we can effectively meet that threat is by assuming—in the words of the authors of *The King's English*—that 'Americanisms are foreign words and should be so treated.' In any compromise between the King's English and the President's English there can be no imaginable advantage."

It is only now and then that voices are raised in protest against this prevailing English snobbery. The late William Archer raised his, and Mr Richard Aldington the poet has done likewise. Archer wrote :

"The vague and unformulated idea behind all such petty cavillings is that the English language is in danger of

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

being corrupted by the importation of Americanisms and that it behoves us to establish a sort of quarantine in order to keep out the detrimental germs. This notion is simply one of the milder phases of the Great Stupidity. . . . Much of the best and purest English of our time has been, and is being, written in America.”<sup>1</sup>

And Mr Aldington :

“ Language is made by the people ; it is only fixed by writers and orators. When language, especially that of poetry, is too far removed from that of the people, it becomes conventional and hieratic, like church Latin ; or languid and degenerate, like modern official French poetry. When language is conventionally used by writers it becomes burdened with clichés and dead phrases. If American soldiers, newspapers and popular novels are evidence, it is clear that the American people is evolving a new language, full of vigorous and racy expressions.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Westminster Gazette*, July, 1921.

<sup>2</sup> *English and American in Poetry*, May, 1920.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

And it is just because American is so full of vigorous and racy expressions that we in England stand to gain more than we shall lose by changing our fashionable attitude towards it into something humbler and less black-avised. Public School Standard, when written by men like Mr David Garnett or Mr Edward Shanks, shows only too many signs of becoming hieratic, languid, and degenerate. It needs to be taken out into the open air, and buffeted by trans-Atlantic winds.

I said our fashionable attitude towards Americanisms was ill-informed as well as smug. Few of us who have not taken the trouble to go into the matter are aware how many of our common expressions derive from the United States. Here is a selection of them :<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I have taken all these from Thornton's *American Glossary*, but in every case I have verified from the OED that the word is a genuine Americanism. Thornton lists a good many that aren't, and these I have omitted.



## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

- Backwoods.  
 Balance (remainder).  
 Beach-comber.  
 Bee-line.  
 Belittle.  
 Best bib and tucker.  
 Big bug.  
 Blizzard.  
 Blue (till all is).  
 Bluff (as noun and verb).  
 Bob-sled, or bob.  
 Bogus.  
 Boodle.  
 Boom (verb).  
 Boost.  
 Boss.  
 Bulge (to have the b. on).  
 Bullyrag.  
 Bunkum.  
 Caboodle.  
 Cake (to take the c.).  
 Cañon.  
 Caption.  
 Carpet-bagger.  
 Caucus.  
 Chewing-gum. (The earlier English form was *mouth-glue*, the recipe for which is given by one John Bale in 1635.)  
 Cold snap.  
 Collateral (in Stock Exchange sense.)  
 Collide.  
 Combine (noun).  
 Coloured man.  
 Corner (verb).  
 Cow-catcher.  
 Crank (eccentric person).  
 Creek.  
 Crook (sharper).  
 Crowd (in sense, *Our crowd* wouldn't do a thing like that).  
 Cuss.  
 Cut no ice.  
 Dago.  
 Draw a bead on.  
 Dug-out (both the canoe and the trench dwelling).  
 Engineer (as verb).  
 Enthuse.  
 Eventuate.  
 Eye peeled (keep your eye peeled).  
 Fence, on the.  
 Filibuster.  
 Fire (as verb, meaning to *dismiss*).  
 Fix (in a fix).  
 Fizzle out.  
 Floor (in sense, *to have, yield, or hold, the floor*).  
 Flurry (of a whale; also, of snow).  
 Freeze out.  
 Funeral, not my.  
 Gerrymander.  
 Gin sling.  
 Go back on.  
 Go it blind.  
 Go one better than.  
 Go the whole hog.  
 Go under.  
 Goatee.  
 Goner.  
 Governmental.  
 Graft.  
 Greased lightning.  
 Gulch.  
 Half-breed.  
 Hang of, get the.  
 Hatchet, bury the.  
 Herring Pond.  
 High-falutin.  
 Hold up.  
 Horse sense.  
 Hot cakes (in sense, *It sells like h.-c.*).  
 Hustle, hustler.  
 Indian file.  
 Indian summer.  
 Indignation meeting.  
 Inwardness, the true.  
 Itemize.  
 Joy-ride.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

Jump (jump a claim).	Raise Cain.
Keep a stiff upper lip.	Ranch.
Keeps, for.	Rattled (in sense of <i>flurried</i> ).
Lengthy.	Red cent.
Level best.	Ring (financial).
Loan (verb).	Rowdy.
Lobby (verb).	Run (in sense of <i>run a man for office</i> ).
Locate.	Savannah.
Log-rolling.	Schoolmarm.
Low-down (adjective).	Scout.
Lynch.	Scrap (in sense of <i>f gk</i> ).
Mass meeting.	Shack.
Mileage.	Shanty.
Mill, go through the.	Shin up.
Misstep.	Shyster.
Monkey with.	Side-track.
Mugwump.	Sidewalk.
Musquash.	Six-shooter.
Negative (verb).	Size up.
No flies on.	Skedaddle.
No two ways about it.	Slick.
Non-committal.	Slouch. (No slouch of a fellow.)
O.K.	Small potatoes (fig.).
On time.	Snag (in a river, and fig.).
Paleface.	Soft drink.
Pan out.	Splurge.
Persimmon.	Spook.
Pesky.	Spread oneself (fig.).
Peter out.	Squatter.
Pile on the agony.	Stampede.
Pivotal.	Stump, on the.
Plank down.	Tammany.
Platform (in political sense).	Timbered.
Play possum.	Tote.
Played-out.	Trade off.
Plumb (adverb).	Under the weather.
Porterhouse steak.	Vamose.
Powwow.	Whole-souled.
Prairie.	Yank (verb).
Previous, too.	Yankee.
Pull up stakes.	
Put it through.	
Rag-time.	

Many of these denote things common in America but uncommon or un-

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

known in England ; others are still slang in England though good colloquial in America ; but many are good literary words in England now, though their first introduction from America was hotly opposed by English purists. And they are all oldish, for Thornton published his *Glossary* in 1912, and did not pretend that it was up to date even then.

Certain other words and idioms are claimed by Americans, and probably passed into colloquial English from American sources ; but their presence in English dialects makes us hesitate to call them genuine Americanisms. Examples are :

Cave in (both lit. and fig.).

Cocktail. (This word appears in Northumbrian, and it is possible it is really a corruption of *cocked ale*.)

Contraption.

Dander.

Dandy.

Disgruntled.

Settle one's hash.

Dust one's jacket.

Kink.

Likely (in sense of *serviceable*).

Lope (which is probably the same as the dialectal word *loup*).

Plead poor mouth.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

If we come down to the present day, and make no bones about including slang, what a rich seam we strike! Certain modern American slang terms are so appropriate and necessary that only incorrigible purists will deny them entrance into good English. Such are :

Bellhop (a page in a hotel, a far better word than *page*, if only because its use would reduce the number of homophones).

Blurb (an indispensable word that I am glad to see coming into general use).

Bootlegger (also indispensable so long as America remains dry).

Chew the rag.

Dope.

Fan (e.g. movie fan : I hesitate more about this word, since its introduction would increase the number of homophones).

Flivver.

Get one's goat.

Gospel-pusher (necessary so long as Fundamentalism rages among the heathen).

Spring the holier-than-thou (useful as a variant of *Come the Holy Willie over*).

Junk (which combines into four letters the notions of *rubbish* and *odds-and-ends*).

Movies (a great improvement on *cinema*).

Peeve (a useful back formation from *peevish*).

Plute (*plutocrat* is too long for invective).

Punk (expressive owing to its sound, and clearly differentiated from both *bunk* and *bunkum*).

Rubberneck (one of the best words ever coined).

Sting (meaning, *to charge too dear*—American, *too steep—a price for something*).

Tight wad (though English *skinflint* is very good).

Uplift (quite indispensable).

Whale of a . . . (specially welcome because it conveys a hint of *hell of a . . .*).

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

Anyone with an up-to-the-jiffy knowledge of American slang will quadruple this list in no time. I have chosen only a few examples that occurred to me.

Good slang, that is virile and expressive slang, is irresistible. Sooner or later the best of it forces its way into received colloquial, and thence the very best passes into the literary speech, enriching and vitalizing it like a freshet. And since the slang coined from year to year in England is, most of it, dwiny, feeble stuff when compared with the output of America, it is to America that we must chiefly look in future for this replenishment and freshening of our language.

As to differences in vocabulary and usage between England and America, these are much less important than is often made out by writers in both countries. No doubt it is a source of momentary confusion that Americans use *shoes* to cover both low shoes

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

and ankle-boots ; that an American enters a house on the *first floor* and an Englishman on the *ground floor* ; that an American says *I won't stand for it* where an Englishman says *I won't stand it* ; that an American calls a *subway* what an Englishman calls *the tube* or *the underground* ; that an American's *vest* and *pants* are not worn underneath his *waistcoat* and *trousers* ; and that an American asks *Are you through ?* when an Englishman would say *Have you finished ?* But what do these minor differences matter, after all ? Mr Mencken, in his eagerness to make out a case, often falls into absurdities ; as when he says that an Englishman does not look *up* a definition in a dictionary, but always looks it *out* ; that an English servant never washes *the dishes*, but always *the tea things* or *the dinner things* ; that an Englishman will say he is *seven-and-forty*, not that he is *forty-seven* ; that an English-

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

man does not have his teeth *filled* by a dentist, but *stopped*; that no Englishman wears a *frock-coat* or lives in a *bungalow*; and so on for page after page of *The American Language*. The truth is, the constant coming and going of words across the Atlantic is providing English-speakers on both sides with alternative ways of saying the same thing, and in most cases both alternatives are good.

In most cases—not in all. Sometimes the American alternative is better, as in *sidewalk* for *pavement*, *fall* for *autumn*, and *thumb-tack* for *drawing-pin*. Very often it is not. Anyone who runs his eye down a list of alternative English and American words for everyday things will be struck with the fact that the American words are generally longer and more pompous; *ordinance* is not so good as *by-law*, nor *commutation-ticket* as *season-ticket*, nor *counterfeiter* as *coiner*,

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

nor *clevator* as *lift*, nor *freight-clevator* as *hoist*, and the use of *mortician* for *undertaker* is ridiculed by the Americans themselves. The American tendency 'to talk big' has left very obvious marks on the language in both elephantine Latinizations and pseudo-scientific jargon; and against these let us in England by all means put up a barrier of derision. But to cry out for a barrier against all Americanisms as such—that is sheer imbecility.

### § 8

In saying that we must look chiefly to America in future for the freshening and replenishment of our language, I am not overlooking sources in the British Isles. We have the local dialects, for example, and in particular the virile local dialects of the North, which have been quite absurdly



## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

neglected by Southern Englishmen for more than two centuries. It is true, Northern words *have* gone south at various times, and are now firmly embedded in the literary speech. Examples are *billow* (1552), *clumsy* (1597), *doze* (1647), and *scamp* (1837); *gruesome* and *glamour* introduced from Scots by Scott; *jeckless*, *lilt*, and *outcome* introduced from the same source by Carlyle; and the more recent *heckle*<sup>1</sup> and *ca-canny*, which have certainly come from north of the Humber and probably from north of the Tweed. But there are plenty more where these came from, and only those purists who maintain that literary English is already as full as it can hold, or those (fortunately not influential) Englishmen who think that nothing good in language can originate north of the Cambridge-

<sup>1</sup> In 1886 *The Leeds Mercury* still printed *heckle* in inverted commas. See quotations in OED.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

Oxford-Bristol line, would oppose the use of more Northern words in received colloquial and their gradual introduction into literature.

Here is a short list of such words, which happen to have taken my fancy at one time or another. None of them is peculiar to one dialect of the North, and most are to be found in all the dialects north of the Trent, and in Ireland as well. If I had added all the purely Scottish words that I love, my list would have been many times as long.

Blackavised—dark in complexion.

Bobbery—fuss (as a noun). This word reappears in Pidgin English, but apparently from another source.

Brashy—small and delicate in constitution.

Cantrip—a spell or trick. Mr Cabell has made this word familiar to many through his *Jurgen*.

Croose—brisk. A Newcastle proverb runs: *A cock's aye croose on his aan midden*.

Daffle—to be in one's dotage.

Darg—a day's work.

Dight—to wipe clean, to put in order.

Doiter—approximately the same as *daffle*.

Dowly—doleful.

Droothy—thirsty.

Dwam, dwamy—faint, feeble. It is very strange that there are many dialectal words beginning with *dw* (Wright gives 32 separate headings), and only three in standard English, viz.: *dwarf*, *dwell*, and *dwindle*, and their

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

- derivatives. And *dwell* is passing out of use. In the dialects the sound *dw* seems to indicate *feebleness*, and I think, very well. Thus we have *dwab*, *dwably*, *dwaiably*, *dwaffle*, *dwam*, *dwamy*, *dwamish*, *dwamlock*, *dwibly*, *dwine* and *dwiny*, all indicating *faintness* or *sickliness*.
- Fike—to fuss needlessly.
- Nobbut—only. Nobbut those who write a great deal are aware how desirable it is to have a variant of *only*.
- Gleg—quick and intelligent.
- Gomeril—a blithering fool. One of the most expressive words I know. It is found all over Scotland, and as far south as Worcestershire.
- Gowpen—as much as the two hollowed hands can hold.
- Haver—to talk nonsense.
- Haugh—meadow lying alongside water.
- Hirple—to hobble, but with a stronger suggestion of infirmity.
- Howf—a haunt where 'cronies' meet.
- Hunker—to squat on the heels.
- Jink—to dodge and evade.
- Loaning—by-road. (In Scotland it sometimes means a paddock.)
- Merle—blackbird. A much better word than *blackbird*. It was used by Caxton, who probably took it direct from French and not from an English dialect.
- Plouter—to wade through water or mud.
- Rowan—the mountain ash.
- Scunner—dislike. No one who has ever used this word as part of his everyday speech will forgo it.
- Swither—to hesitate. Half its virtue lies in its suggestion of *whether*.
- Sorn—to dump yourself bag and baggage on someone, and stay, despite his wish and efforts to get rid of you.
- Tacket—square-headed nail in the sole of a boot.
- Thole—to suffer, or put up with.
- Thrawn—crooked, cross-grained. Familiar from Stevenson's story *Thrawn Janet*, one of the best short stories in English—though most of it happens to be in Scots.
- Threap—to insist, argue, or wrangle.
- Throng—congested with work.
- Toom—empty. Its hollow sound is enough.
- Unbeknownst—just what it says.
- Unchancy—ill-omened and risky, with a suggestion of the supernatural that these words have lost or never possessed.
- Wairsh—insipid, like flat soda-water.
- Wamble—to rumble. I suggest that this word be kept (as it is in some dialects) for the special purpose of denoting audible intestinal disturbances.
- Warsel—to struggle.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

There must also be many good Irish dialectal words, as there are certainly many good Irish dialectal idioms, which could be introduced with advantage into received colloquial English and into literature. The number of specifically Irish words which have already been introduced would appear to be singularly small, considering how many of the best English writers, from Spenser to Mr Shaw and Mr Joyce, have either been Irish by nationality or closely associated with the country. *Blarney*, *galore*, *shamrock*, and *smithereens* are Irish; and so, oddly enough, is *bother*, for which the first quotation given in the OED is dated 1718 and taken from a letter of Thomas Sheridan's to Jonathan Swift. On the other hand, many specifically Irish idioms, originally direct translations out of Erse, have established themselves in English and no longer show their

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

origin ; and there are still a few more that might be adopted with profit, as everyone acquainted with Synge's and Lady Gregory's plays will agree. If, as I hope, Irish Standard becomes eventually the received Standard speech of all the British Isles, it is probable, nay certain, that the language will benefit still further in idiom and vocabulary.

For the enrichment of Standard English, then, we should look first to America, and then to the English, Scots, and Irish dialects. But there is still a third source to be considered, still a third means by which the language can be strengthened and diversified : writers may make their own words. In its capacity to form new words out of old materials English, as Mr Logan Pearsall Smith has pointed out, stands midway between German and French ; new English compounds are formed with less facility than new

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

German ones, but with more facility than new French ones. On the root *Kron-*, for instance, the Germans have built up *Kronanwalt*, *Kronband*, *Kronbeamte*, *Kronbewerber*, *Kronerbe*, *Kronfeldherr*, *Krongut*, *Kronhirsch*, *Kronlehen*, *Kronleuchter*, *Kronprinz*, *Kronprinzessin*, *Kronprinzlich*, *Kronrat*, *Kronräuber*, *Kronrede*, and *Kronzeuge*. Nothing of this kind is possible in French, and though it used to be a common practice in English to form compounds in the same way, we are now more reluctant to do it. Some modern compounds have lasted; e.g. *railway*, *steamboat* (though this is being driven out by *steamer*), and *goldfield*. But the trend of the language seems to be now rather against, than in favour of the formation of compounds, and existing compounds have a way of shortening themselves as soon as possible. Thus *motor-car* is colloquially shortened to *motor* or

## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

*car*, *tram-car* to *tram* or *car*, and *lawn-tennis* to *tennis*. This is perfectly sound. Double-barrelled words (like *double-barrelled*) are rather like grammatical inflections; they are inclined to be rigid, whereas a phrase is flexible. New inventions by writers, therefore, stand more chance of incorporation into the standard speech of the people if they are (i) single-moulded, or (ii) formed with one of the recognized affixes, as Carlyle formed *Bedlamism*, *grumbly*, *dandiacal*, *decadent*, and *environment*, or (iii) a phrase rather than a word.

The only contemporary writer who has boldly coined new, and adopted dialectal, words is Mr James Joyce. By merely dipping here and there into *Ulysses* I have fished up the following :

Oakpale.		Dewsilky.
Snotgreen.		Smokeplume.
Cuffedge.		Wheysour.
Smokeblue.		Seacold.
Woodshadows		Crawsick.
Inshore.	} All in the same paragraph.	Thickplotting.
Lightshod.		Coughball (in the lively
Harptrings.		phrase a coughball of
Wavewhite.		laughter).
Muskperfumed.		Horsenostrilled.

## ENGLISH AS SPOKE AND WROTE

Loudlatinlaughing.  
Lacefringe.  
Redpanting.  
Windraw.  
Warmbubbled.  
Sausagepink.  
Whitenlattered.  
Creepycrawl.  
Newgathered.  
Bronzelidded.  
Softcreakfooted.

Nookshotten (a dialectal word).  
Moonycrowned.  
Coistrel (a dialectal word).  
Warningfully.  
Oxter (a dialectal word).  
Snaggletusks (*snaggletooth* is already an English word though a rare one).  
Glovesilent.  
Clipclap.

and a more diligent search would no doubt have revealed twice or three times as many more. All these, however, are very characteristic of Mr Joyce's style, and at one time I would have hotly defended every one of them against his detractors. Now, I am not so sure. I do not think many, or even any, of Mr Joyce's compounds formed on this plan will last. I do not think they should. On the other hand, I have nothing but praise for his bold and masterful handling of individual words, and his combinations of them into vivid and original phrases. He handles words with a cavalier dexterity almost unknown in English literature since the time of Elizabeth ; his only rival in the



## BREAKING PRISCIAN'S HEAD

last hundred years is Walt Whitman. What, for instance, could be better, could be more adroit in the grand manner of the Elizabethans, than :

Stroking palps of fingers.

Warm sunshine merrying over the sea.

It slapped open.

A coughball of laughter (let us swallow the *coughball*).

A porterbottle stogged to the waist.

Crutch (as a verb).

Plume (as a verb), used of smoke.

and a hundred more of the same kind that anyone may find for himself in the pages of *Ulysses* ?

Whoever would counsel us to coin no new words, no new phrases, no new idioms, since the English language is already full enough—let us pay no heed to him. We have the richest language in Europe now, and all because our forefathers paid no heed to the fly-blown Priscians of their day, but, when they needed a word, made it, or stole it, little caring if its synonym was lying ready by. Enough can never be as good as a feast, when the feast is of vivid and expressive words.

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# TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW

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